Center for Modern Greek Studies
Greek American Oral History Project
Transcription

Tape:

Subject: Helen Christopher
Interviewer: Gentle Wagner
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I: Interviewer
H: Helen

Counter: 000

I: //first about her brother George Christopher, who was mayor of San Francisco and today is July 14th. Helen, first of all I'd like to establish your Greek background umm your parents were the ones who were the original immigrants. Can you please tell me about them?

H: Yes, our father came to America and he stayed for a while and then he went back to Greece, he went to the village. Actually he was born in another village, not the same as my mother but his mother passed away at child-, when at childbirth after he was born and so he was adopted by a lady in my mother's village so he figured that's where he was from and so that was umm. I, Saint Peter's and in the state of Arcadia and then he came back to America and while he was gone George was born and but he wasn't writing to my mother because he was ashamed to write without enclosing money. And in those days they only made a dollar or two dollars a day, he was trying to save the money to bring her. And so *finally* he was able to do it and my mother and George came to America.

I: Do you know what year they got married?

H: Let's see uhh, I imagine it was 1906.

I: And how much time passed before she came to America?

H: A couple years. I uhh George was born in 1907 so he was two years old so about 7 or 9.

I: And what was the trip to the U.S. like for your mother?

H: Oh, it was very difficult because they had uhh they didn't have transportation we have today. They had to get to the uhh Tri-, Tripolis which was in the city closest to their village. They had to get there by donkey and from there they finally got to the port of Athens. It took 30 days on the ship and once they got to New York it took two weeks by train and George was afraid. He saw the porters and they're all black and he hadn't seen a black man before and it scared him, he was a baby and she had to carry him all the way and we used to tease her, tell her George was her pet. And she says, "Yes, my pet, I carried him all the way over the ocean <laughing> the whole way here." <laughing>

I: Uhh so your mother arrived in New York, well first of all did she bring anything from Greece with her, other than George?

H: No, just what clothes they had and that, nothing else.

I: And was there someone to meet her in New York?

H: No, at least they went through the Ellis Island and then my grandfather, my mother's father, uhh there was somebody else that was coming to San Francisco at the time and he says, "Look, take care of this money for my daughter, she doesn't understand the money and help her in any way you can." So he sort of disappeared at Ellis Island and then through an interpreter she told them this man had, she didn't have money, they weren't going to let her land, uhh stay. So they got a hold of this man and he turned over the money and maybe he, maybe he was on the same train, they don't know. But I think there are others because I heard other people say they came across at the same time so. She got here finally. She was determined, she says, "I'm going where that man is." He is.

I: And so uhh when she arrived umm did your father, what kind of work was he doing and where was he living?

H: Oh and then he lived in San Francisco. He had a little coffee shop on 3rd Street where all the original Greek started uhh on 3rd Street. They all had business there, barber shop, bars, restaurants, grocery stores. There are one, two, three, four grocery stores within one block and they had all the Greek products and everything and all these immigrants were able to speak to these people and get what they wanted. So it, that was sort of a Greek and Irish town down there, all our neighbors were Greek or Irish.

I: Umm so how did your father earn his, he had a lunch counter?

H: Yes a small restaurant.

I: And what was the name of it?

H: Reception Café.

I: And where was it located exactly?

H: It was on uhh 3rd Street on the corner of Minna {040} and across the street was Chicago Restaurant and Bar owned by the Kahouz {040} family and Gidas {040} family.

I: So your family, were your families close?

H: Oh yes, yes.

I: And what was Greek town like when you were growing up?

H: Well there were these restaurants where all the bachelors used to go and eat, in those days families couldn't afford to go to restaurants. The bachelors would go and they're nice restaurants and lots of coffee houses where they would go and have coffee and play cards with other bachelors.

I: Was it safe for children?

H: Oh very safe, very safe, no problem at all.

I: Did your mother work?

H: No, she never left the house, she was took care of us all the time.

I: So, George was born in uhh Saint Peter's.

H: Yes.

I: In Greece, what year? Or what, what, what was his birthday?

H: '07, 1907.

I: And//

H: //December 8th.

I: Ok and what was life like for him as a child?

H: Well he was involved with the church very much, he was an altar boy and he worked, he was delivering papers and then eventually he went to work at Examiner, took him in the office, he was payroll, payroll clerk and he worked and went to night school through high school and the Golden Gate University, they call it now. And he went to sch-, night school all that time to get his education.

I: And what year did he graduate?

H: Mmm I imagine it must have been 1932 or so. I gave his diploma to Golden Gate University and now and they were so happy to receive it.

I: Yeah//

H: //cuz he was a supporter of the school.

I: Umm in 1930 he became a U.S. citizen, naturalized citizen.

H: I, well as soon as he became of age.

I: Mmhmm. And umm was he the first citizen in the family?

H: First child and first citizen, yes.

I: And what was the family's reaction to this decision to become a citizen?

H: Ohh they were for it, in fact my mother wanted it very badly, she became a citizen also and my father. But he died at a young age so my mother uhh we didn't think she would pass, she was following us all around the house with her book and all our friends would come over and she'd say, "Help me, please help me!" because we'd get tired, you know? And then that poor kid, they were trapped. So she went to uhh appear before the judge and so she says, "Your honor, I came to this country a young girl and now I'm an old lady but I have five good American citizens, I love this country and I want to be a citizen too. I don't want welfare, I don't want anything, I just want to be a citizen."

I: <laughing>

H: And she passed first time.

I: And how old was she when she became a citizen?

H: Mmm, gosh I don't know now. Uhh she must have been around 40, I can imagine.

I: And uhh when George became a citizen, a U.S. citizen, was there any sort of celebration or//

H: //I don't, don't know <laughing>

I: What kind of work did he do before he got involved in politics?

H: Oh he was an accountant. And that helped him a lot with his business.

I: And he eventually umm bought Christopher dairy?

H: Well actually it was Green Baret Dairy at the time, owned by the O, O'Brien family. It was an old, small dairy but it was just home delivery but he built it into a wholesale kind uhh company.

I: And why did he, is there a story behind his involvement in the dairy or why he decided to purchase it?

H: Well he was workin' for one dairy and they kept tellin' him they wanted him to uhh they were going to sell it to him so and but they never did. So he told 'em, well he said, "I don't wanna work for a salary <mumbling> so I'm gonna have to start a business." And then he started and he did well.

I: And uhh he married Tula {081}.

H: Yes, oh he had worked for her father, he had a bakery on 17th Street, the Golden West Bakery. I said he worked there as an accountant and that's where he met her but our parents were friends cuz they all, as I said, they all originated south of Market.

I: What was their courtship like?

H: Well those days the girls weren't allowed to date much, you know? They'd have to have a chaperone with 'em <laughing>

I: Do you remember him talking about her before they got married?

H: No, we were young and we didn't talk about those things <laughing>.

I: I'd like to talk about uhh your Greek identity or his Greek identity. Was Greek spoken at home?

H: Yes, my mother uhh didn't speak uhh English at all and she went to school and learned some, you know but it was easier for her to converse in Greek with us and we had a, a teacher coming to the house and gave us lessons and then we also went to the Greek school. So we all spoke it and read and write it also.

I: How did your family maintain the Greek heritage at home?

H: Well, you know, my mother runs the house, you know? She spoke to us in Greek and she took us to the church, church every Sunday and she did everything she felt was right.

I: Were there any particular customs that, that were traditional from uhh her place, from her//

H: //Oh yes, all the holidays, everything. All of her baking, her cooking, her pastries and everything. She'd follow through with everything as well as all the other people in the area.

I: Any kind of handicrafts?

H: She didn't have time for that.

I: Yeah.

H: <laughing> You see when she was born she was the first child in her family, in this big family and she had to help raise the others. So she didn't have time for anything.

I: So when she came to America, was there family still in Greece?

H: Yes, some of her sisters eventually moved, one moved to South Africa and then she brought three others over to South Africa, they all got married there and now little by little some have gone to Australia, others to Greece, cuz conditions weren't too good lately in South Africa.

I: Umm so she maintained those friend-, those relationships and friendships with people//

H: //Oh yeah//

I: //in Greece as well as//

H: //In Greece? Oh yeah, she, she did and she went back ohh in 1939 her father had passed away and she was upset so my father had already passed away. So George got a hold of this man that sold uhh he had a travel agency, brought him to the house one night and he said, "Give my mother a ticket." And in 1939 she went to Greece, she had to go by boat {114} I remember that. And so uhh he had just been married and my mother had six flats so he lived in the flat below us so they kind of looked after us, made sure we were alright. So she went '39, she went in '57, she went in '62 with me, then she went with my sister in '68 I think, something like that. So she went back quite a few times, she kept in touch.

I: And when did George first go to Greece?

H: Well when he got married he and his wife went, I don't know exactly when that was, but he got married in 1935 but then in 1957 he was a guest of the government and the whole family went. George flew ahead of time with newspaper reporters from San Francisco and other officials. They went to uhh on the first flight to Paris, TWA's first flight to Paris and from there he joined us in, we were on the ship, we sailed from New York and he joined us in Naples, they rolled out the red carpet and we had dinner with the captain every night. It was very nice, they treated us royalty and we got to Greece

and before we landed all of our little tenders came out with officials and greeted us aboard ship and every-, it was all, that was an official trip while George was there. Then after he left we were on our own.

I: And what, what did you guys do after he left?

H: Ohh we were going out with all the friends he had made, of course, we didn't know them but every time we'd go down the hotel lobby it was just crowded with people, we didn't know who they were. And some people had seen several times and finally we got to know who was who because there just newspaper reporters, oh the place was just full. But it was a very pleasant trip, that was our first trip, that was his second trip. But then he had gone back many times after that and I also, all of us.

I: Did in, during that trip, did he stay in Athens the whole time or did he travel anywhere else?

H: He uhh we went to the island of Tinos which is like {136} my mother had made a vow when he was young, he got sick, pnemonia, and they didn't expect him to live. I don't know if I'd tell you that story. Well anyway so my mother umm was very upset and she said, "Oh God, please save this child, I'm alone here." And so she told somebody, go get the doctor again, tell him to come again. And the doctor said, "He's still alive?" And she said yes. So he came and he pinched George and George let out a yell, he says, "This, he's going to be the biggest criminal or the best man, he's going to be a great man." And so she had made this vow and so that's why we went in '57, we all went to this church there, you know, and, and that they had this icons just full of jewels, people make pledges and all, they donate things, whatever they have on them they take off and get and then they sell this, all this jewelry and provide for the poor. So well word got out that we were going so they had all white washed their homes and businesses and they said they brought the icon down from the church to us, which is very unusual. So and we had, there were newspaper reporters here uhh with us from San Francisco, Morry Sheen {151} from the {152} Bulletin and Marry Ellen Leary from the San Francisco Examiner and my mother says, "No, we're not, we're gonna walk up, she wanted to walk up." And oh, we got so emotional, Morry Sheen ready to tell the story. Well, as we kept goin' everyone was cryin' more and more and more and more. Nobody could control themselves and they had white washed. But we had a friend that was a captain in the Greek navy and he told the United States Navy that we were going to Greece uhh we'd be there and we were going to the island of Tinos so the United States Navy provided the seat plane and took us to Tinos in twenty minutes whereas it would have taken us eight hours by boat and uhh had services there and some couple came up to them and said, "We would like for you to baptize our child," and he did while we were there. And they provided a nice lunch for us and we left. It was very emotional, the whole trip. And in Greece, oh we were with the mayor all the time and everybody was there looking after us, making sure we enjoyed it.

I: How did he feel about that trip?

H: Oh, it meant a lot to him because he had been to the shrine and my mother had been but never together and he wanted to do that so it pleased him that we went.

I: Did he have any particular stories he liked to tell about his trips to Greece?

H: Well, you mean that trip or the one with all the Chamber of Commerce?

I: Any of 'em. Was there any//

H: //Well//

I: //one trip that was especially special to him that was very//

H: //Well he did enjoy them all, he enjoyed them all.

I: Was there anything uhh about Greece umm that bothered him or disappointed him?

H: No, he fit right in.

I: How was it different from America?

H: Well in those days it was a, the country was a poor country, still is a poor country and didn't have all the conveniences that we have here, of course, we're spoiled. We have everything here. Well, even the last few years, oh since his wife passed away he would take my sister and I, cuz her husband had passed away, on cruises all the time. They either originated in Greece or ended up in Greece and so